

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
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R 091001Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY DACCA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4562
INFO AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DACCA 2472

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, BG
SUBJ: THE REFERENDUM THREE WEEKS AWAY

SUMMARY: THREE WEEKS REMAIN BEFORE THE REFERENDUM ON ZIA
AND HIS PROGRAM IS HELD IN BANGLADESH. HE HAS BEEN CAM-
PAIGNING ACTIVELY WITH TOURS OUTSIDE DACCA. HIS GOAL
IN THE REFERENDUM WILL BE SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT AMONG THOSE
VOTING, BUT HE WILL ALSO WANT THIS TO BE ACHIEVED
THROUGH A HIGH LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION. HE MUST TAKE
CARE TO AVOID CHARGES OF "RIGGING". HIS 19POINT PROGRAM
HAS RECEIVED GENERAL APPROBATION ALTHOUGH THERE IS SOME
INEVITABLE DISAGREEMENT ON EMPHASIS AND TIMING. POLITICAL
PARTIES BY AND LARGE HAVE NOT DECIDED WHETHER TO SUPPORT
OR OPPOSE; THERE MAY BE SOME EFFORT TO INCREASE ABSTENTIONS.
THE MUSLIM LEAGUE APPEARS PREPARED TO WORK FOR ZIA. THE
AWAMI LEAGUE IS BESET WITH FACTIONALISM WHICH COULD
NEUTRALIZE ANY SIGNIFICANT ROLE FOR IT. THE BAN ON
PUBLIC MEETINGS BY PARTIES PRECLUDES ANY DIRECT CAM-
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PAIGNING. SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS ARE IMPORTANT AS
"MISCREANTS" MAY SEE THIS PERIOD AS A LAST CHANCE TO STRIKE
AT ZIA AND HIS REGIME. PROSPECTS ARE FOR A ZIA MAJORITY
BUT THE MAGNITUDE IS BY NO MEANS CERTAIN, NOR IS THE LEVEL
OF PARTICIPATION. END SUMMARY.

1. WITH THREE WEEKS TO GO BEFORE HE FACES THE VOTERS

OF BANGLADESH IN A REFERENDUM TO APPROVE (OR DISAPPROVE) HIS PRESIDENCY AND HIS PROGRAMS, GENERAL ZIAUR RAHMAN, PRESIDENT FOR TWO AND A HALF WEEKS, HAS BEEN CAMPAIGNING WITH A NUMBER OF TOURS OUTSIDE DACCA. HE HAS ALSO HAD MEETINGS WITH A SELECTED GROUP OF POLITICAL LEADERS (DACCA 2434). A SERIES OF DIRECTIVES FROM THE ELECTION COMMISSION HAS SET THE FRAMEWORK IN WHICH THE REFERENDUM WILL BE HELD. RETURNING OFFICERS HAVE BEEN NAMED FOR EACH POLLING PLACE AND RADIO AND TELEPHONE LINKS HAVE BEEN SET UP TO GET THE RETURNS INTO DACCA HEADQUARTERS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. BALLOT BOXES HAVE BEEN PREPARED, WITH TWO (ONE FOR "YES" ADORNED WITH ZIA'S PHOTOGRAPH AND ONE FOR "NO" UNMARKED EXCEPT FOR THE WORD "NO") TO BE PLACED IN EACH POLLING STATION.

2. ZIA'S 19-POINT PROGRAM (DACCA 2322) IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED UNEXCEPTIONABLE AS A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH. AMONG THE POLITICALLY ACTIVE IN DACCA THERE IS SOME CARPING ON SPECIFIC ITEMS, BUT MORE IN TERMS OF EMPHASIS PLACED BY ZIA THAN IN ACTUAL CONTENT. HOWEVER, IT IS WIDELY HELD THAT THE PROGRAM IS ONE FOR LONG TERM GOALS AND IS, BY AND LARGE, INCAPABLE OF EARLY ASPECTS OF ZIA'S CAMPAIGN IN THE GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE BROAD ACCEPTANCE OF HIS PROGRAM.

3. RIGGING: HIGH ON THE LIST OF THINGS ZIA MUST NOT DO (AND MUST NOT BE SUSPECTED OF DOING) IS RIGGING OF THE POLL IN ORDER TO ATTAIN A HIGH MAJORITY. AS FORMER PAKISTANIS, THE POPULATION HERE IS WELL AWARE OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN PAKISTAN. WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS (THOSE BEING CONFIDENTIAL

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LIMITED TO THE EXTREMIST LEFT), BANGLADESHIS DESIRE AN EVENTUAL RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT BUT, MORE THAN THIS, THEY WANT THIS TO OCCUR IN A PEACEFUL FASHION. THE DELICATE SECURITY SITUATION HERE LIKELY COULD NOT WITHSTAND A SERIES OF DEMONSTRATIONS WHICH MIGHT RESULT FROM ACTUAL OR STRONGLY SUSPECTED FALSIFICATION OF THE RESULTS. WE EXPECT THAT PRECAUTIONS WILL BE TAKEN AGAINST SUCH CHARGES.

4. PARTICIPATION: ZIA WILL WISH TO HAVE A LARGE PERCENTAGE OF THE ELECTORS TAKE PART IN THE POLL. ALREADY THERE ARE SIGNS AND NEWSPAPER NOTICES EXHORTING THE VOTERS TO PARTICIPATE, ALTHOUGH THESE HAVE AVOIDED A PARTISAN APPROACH. IN THE 1970 ELECTION MORE THAN 70 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE VOTED AND THIS WILL NO DOUBT BE THE GOAL FOR THE NEXT REFERENDUM. HOWEVER, IN 1970, EAST PAKISTAN HAD A CHARISMATIC LEADER WHO WAS FACED WITH IDENTIFIABLE OPPONENTS, WHO HAD A REASONABLY WELL DISCIPLINED ORGANIZATION AND WHO PROCLAIMED A PROGRAM WHICH WAS CLEAR AND BRIEF. THESE FACTORS ARE NOT PRESENT NOW. ZIA

HAS NO SPECIFIC OPPONENT AND IT IS NOT AT ALL CLEAR WHAT WOULD RESULT (CONSTITUTIONALLY OR PRACTICALLY) SHOULD HE LOSE. HE HAS NO EXPLICIT ORGANIZATION. AND SIX CLEARLY STATED ANTI-WEST PAKISTANI, PRO-AUTONOMIST POINTS ARE EASIER FOR THE VOTERS TO DIGEST THAN NINETEEN BROADLY DEFINED GOALS FOR THE LONGER RANGE. THUS ZIA MAY FACE WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED "PASSIVE ABSTENTION" RESULTING FROM APATHY AND NOT FROM CLEAR OPPOSITION TO HIM AND HIS PROGRAM. HE MAY ALSO FACE "ACTIVE ABSTENTION" AS POLITICAL PARTIES WISHING TO EMBARRASS HIM MAY TRY TO INSPIRE THEIR FOLLOWERS TO ABSTAIN.

5. ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES: WE HAVE BEEN SAMPLING OPINION WITHIN THE MORE IMPORTANT POLITICAL PARTIES. IN A NO-CLEAR-ALTERNATIVE REFERENDUM, THE PARTIES ARE NECESSARILY HANDICAPPED IN DETERMINING THEIR OWN ROLE. THEY ARE ALSO STILL SHACKLED BY THE BAN ON PUBLIC MEETINGS
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SO THAT EVEN IF ANY OF THEM WANTED TO TAKE A LEAD FOR OR AGAINST ZIA THEY WOULD BE UNABLE TO IN THE TRADITIOAL MANNER OF BANGLADESHI POLITICAL COMPAIGNING. THE POSITIONS BEING TAKEN (OR NOT BEING TAKEN, IN SOME CASES) APPEAR NOW TO BE AS FOLLOWS:

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 /056 W
-----100214Z 105834 /64

R 091001Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY DACCA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 563
INFO AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
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A. MUSLIM LEAGUE: THE PARTY IS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE STEPS TAKEN BY ZIA IN THE DIRECTION OF ISLAMICIZATION OF THE CONSTITUTION. IT ALSO BELIEVES THAT THE STEP-BY-STEP RESTORATION OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT PROPOSED BY ZIA IS A GOOD MOVE, ALTHOUGH, LIKE MOST PARTIES WHOSE PHILOSOPHIES INCLUDE PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT, IT WOULD WISH ZIA TO ADVANCE THE SCHEDULE FOR NATIONAL ELECTIONS FROM DECEMBER, 1978. THE PARTY WILL SUPPORT ZIA AND MAY, THROUGH ITS REVIVING ORGANIZATION, WORK FOR BOTH HIGH PARTICIPATION AND A LARGE FAVORABLE VOTE. THE MUSLIM LEAGUE THINKS THE TIDE IS WITH THEM (A VIEW NOT SHARED BY ALL) AND THE ZIA ELECTORAL SEQUENCE WILL LEAD TO A MUSLIM LEAGUE-LED ADMINISTRATION IN DUE COURSE.

B. OTHER ISLAMIC GROUPS: THESE, TOO, ARE PLEASED WITH THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND WILL SUPPORT ZIA, ALTHOUGH HOW MUCH ACTIVE WORK WILL RESULT AND TO WHAT EFFECT IS DOUBTFUL.

C. AWAMI LEAGUE: AS WE HAVE REPORTED (DACCA 2116), THE AWAMI LEAGUE IS RENT WITH FACTIONALISM WHICH IS PARTIALLY IDEOLOGICAL AND PARTIALLY PERSONAL. THE PARTY ORGANIZATION AT THE LOCAL LEVELS APPEARS TO BE AS EQUALLY DIVIDED
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AS THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND IS WAITING FOR DIRECTION FROM THE TOP. THE "LEFTIST" FACTION WOULD LIKE TO SEE A LOW TURNOUT AND A LOW FAVORABLE VOTE FOR ZIA. HOWEVER, ITS ENERGIES MAY BE SO DEVOTED TO INTERNAL SQUABBLING THAT IT CANNOT PLAY A MAJOR ROLE. ZIA HIMSELF HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE DIVISION BY SELECTIVE RELEASE OF AWAMI LEAGUE LEADERS WHO MAY BE MORE FAVORABLY DISPOSED TOWARD HIM OR HOW, AT LEAST, CAN KEEP THE FACTIONAL POT BOILING. (DACCA 2119). THE RECENTLY RELEASED HAVE JOINED WITH THE "RIGHT" OF THE PARTY TO "REQUISITION" A MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF THE LEAGUE IN MID-MAY, FOLLOWING A TIME-HONORED SOUTH ASIAN POLITICAL DEVICE. WE WILL BE WATCHING AWAMI LEAGUE ACTIVITY AS THE POLLING DATE APPROACHES. THE ROLE PLAYED AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS COULD HAVE AN IMPORTANT BEARING ON THE OUTCOME OF THE REFERENDUM.

D. DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE: WITH ITS LEADER, MUSHTAQUE AHMAD, NOW IN JAIL, THE DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE IS IN DIFFICULT SCAITS AND PROBABLY WILL PLAY NO IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE REFERENDUM. THE PARTY HAS NO ORGANIZATION WORTH MENTIONING AND HAS DEPENDED ON THE PERSONAL APPEAL OF MUSHTAQUE, WHICH IS MORE LIMITED THAN ONCE THOUGHT.

E. THE FELT: ZIA HAS BEEN MEETING WITH SEVERAL LEFTIST LEADERS, NOTABLY MOHAMMED TOAHA OF THE SAMYABADI DEL (COMMUNIST PARTY, ONE BRANCH), NASER BHASHANI (SON OF THE LATE NPA/B LEADER), KAZI ZAFAR AHMAD OF THE UNITED

PEOPLE'S PARTY AND ALEEM-AL-REZEE OF THE PEOPLE'S LEAGUE.
THESE MINISCULE GROUPS MAY GIVE SUPPORT TO ZIA.

6. MINORITIES: ABOUT 15 PERCENT OF THE VOTERS IN BANGLADESH ARE HINDUS, BOTH "CASTE" AND "SCHEDULED CASTE". THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LATTER HAS APPARENTLY INCREASED AS THE DECLINE IN PROPORTION OF HINDUS IN THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN CAUSED BY AN EXODUS FROM THE "CASTE" GROUP. ZIA HAS BEEN MEETING THE LEADER OF THE BANGLADESH SCHEDULED CASTE FEDERATION IN AN EFFORT TO WIN THESE AWAY FROM THE USUAL HINDU ALLEGIANCE TO THE AWAMI LEAGUE OR THE SECULAR LEFT. HIS SUCCESS IS
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ANY, WILL NOT BE KNOWN UNTIL A CAREFUL STUDY OF THE RETURNS CAN BE MADE. AS TO THE "CASTE" HINDUS IT CAN BE EXPECTED THAT THEY (AND, NO DOUBT, MANY OF THE "SCHEDULED CASTE" AND OTHER MINORITIES) ARE UNHAPPY ABOUT THE ISLAMIC CHANGES IN THE CONSTITUTION. TRADITIONAL ALLEGIANCES TO THE SECULAR PARTIES ALSO DOES NOT INDICATE THAT EIA WILL GET MUCH SUPPORT FROM THESE GROUPS. ADD TO THIS THE RECORD DEMONSTRATED IN THE PAST THAT PARTICIPATION IS HIGHER AMONG HINDUS, AND, ESPECIALLY, AMONG HINDU WOMEN, COMPARED TO MUSLIMS AND THE PROSPECT OF MUCH SUPPORT FOR ZIA FROM THE MINORITIES IS NOT BRIGHT FROM HIS POINT OF VIEW.

7. TERRORISTS: ONE SPECTRE WHICH HANGS OVER THE ZIA CAMP IS THE POSSIBILITY THAT DISSIDENTS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, NOTABLY THOSE LED BY KADER SIDDIQUI, WILL SEE THE TIME FOR POLLING AS A LAST OPPORTUNITY TO BRING ZIA DOWN AND WILL INTENSIFY ACTS OF TERRORISM AT THAT TIME. THE GOVERNMENT IS ALERT TO THIS AND WILL INCREASE SECURITY MEASURES, BUT THE POSSIBILITY OF INCIDENTS MUST BE CONSIDERED.

8. FOREIGN ACTIVITIES: MANY BANGLADESHIS BELIEVE THAT INDIAN SUPPORT OF THE "MISCREANTS" AND OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE WILL END WITH THE NEW JANATA REGIME IN DELHI. THUS THE POSSIBILITY OF INDIAN FUNDS BEING USED AGAINST ZIA IS DISCOUNTED. HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT IS STILL VERY MUCH CONCERNED THAT THE SOVIETS MAY CONTINUE SUPPORT TO THE AWAMI LEAGUE, MONI SINGH'S COMMUNIST PARTY AND MUZAFFAR AHMAD'S NAP. RUMORS OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT ARE PRESENT BUT ARE DISPARATE. IN ONE DIRECTION WE ARE SAID TO BE OPPOSING ZIA SO THAT MUSHTAQUE CAN COME BACK WHILE IN THE OTHER WE ARE ALLEGED TO SUPPORT ZIA SO THAT A FAVORABLE MILITARY REGIME WILL CONTINUE IN OFFICE INDEFINITELY. WE ARE, OF COURSE, TAKING EVERY PRECAUTION NOT TO BE SEEN AS OVERLY INTERESTED, BUT WE COULD, NONETHELESS, END UP
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IN A "HEADS I WIN, TAILS YOU LOSE" SITUATION.

9. OUTCOME: AT THE MOMENT, AND SUBJECT TO REVISION,
IT SEEMS THAT ZIA WILL WIN A MAJORITY OF THE VOTES
POLLED. THE RANGE IN WHICH THIS MAJORITY WILL BE FOUND
AND THE LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION IS QUESTIONABLE.
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Message Attributes

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